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DOI: 10.5937/turpos0-47040

UDK: 616.98:578.834]:338.48(497.11)
338.482:159.942

THE HIDDEN WEIGHT OF TOURISM IN A POST-PANDEMIC PERIOD

СКРИВЕНИ ТЕРЕТ ТУРИЗМА У ПОСТ-ПАНДЕМИЈСКОМ ПЕРИОДУ

Abstract: *After a period marked by the global pandemic of COVID-19 and its effects on the social and economic aspects, it becomes obvious that the world will have consequences for a long time. This study sought to determine the predominant category of fear that has the most significant impact on the propensity of potential tourists to visit destinations that have been affected by the pandemic and which, due to prevailing prejudices, have been categorized as “dangerous”. The research was carried out in the Republic of Serbia on a sample of 800 respondents. The SPSS 21.00 program was used for data processing, and empirical findings clarify that different categories of fear have a visible influence in shaping prejudices associated with “dangerous” travel destinations. These preconceptions have a noticeable effect on the tendency to travel to destinations that are categorized as dangerous. The analysis further found gender-based disparities, with men showing greater apprehension about financial and natural hazards, while women showed increased concerns about the risks of contracting COVID-19 and traveling to risky destinations.*

Keywords: *tourism, post-pandemic, COVID-19, travel risk, Republic of Serbia*

Анотација: Након периода који је обележен глобалном пандемијом COVID-19 и њених утицаја на друштвени и економски аспект, постаје очигледно да ће свет још дуго имати последице. Ова студија је настојала да утврди преовлађујућу категорију страха која има најзначајнији утицај на склоност потенцијалних туриста да посете дестинације које су биле погођене пандемијом, а које су, због преовлађујућих предрасуда, категорисане као “опасне”. Истраживање је реализовано у Републици Србији на узорку од 800 испитаника. За обраду података коришћен је програм SPSS 21.00 а емпиријски налази разјашњавају да различите категорије страха имају видљив утицај у обликовању предубеђења повезаних са “опасним” дестинацијама за путовања. Ова предубеђења имају приметан утицај на склоност ка путовању до дестинација које су категорисане као опасне. Анализа је даље уочила родно засноване диспаратете, при чему су мушкарци показивали већу бојазан према финансијским и природним опасностима, док су жене показивале повећану забринутост у вези са ризицима од инфекције COVID-19 и путовањем на ризичне дестинације.

Кључне речи: *туризам, пост-пандемија, COVID-19, ризик путовања, Република Србија*



Introduction

Throughout history, it is evident that various factors can exert profound influences on the socio-economic systems of human societies. One striking example of such a disruptive force is the occurrence of pandemics. The most recent and notable of these was the COVID-19 virus pandemic, which wrought havoc on the functioning of virtually every country across the globe. This virus's ability to transmit not only through physical contact but also via airborne particles heightened the risks of infection. Consequently, nations worldwide resorted to implementing a range of restrictive measures, including curfews and border closures (Rothan & Byrareddy, 2020; Shi et al., 2020; Su et al., 2021). These restrictions precipitated a surge in fear of infection, resulting in heightened levels of psychological distress and anxiety within the population. These emotional responses, in turn, led individuals to eschew social gatherings and, subsequently, curtailed their participation in tourist activities. The repercussions of this trend have been keenly felt by the tourism and hospitality sectors, with income reductions and even complete closures of businesses offering food, beverage, and tourism services (Gössling et al., 2020; Ge et al., 2021; Lei et al., 2021).

This pandemic acquired the ominous moniker of the "invisible enemy" due to the initial lack of knowledge about the virus, its evolution, and transmission patterns. This lack of information disrupted all aspects of daily life for the global population. In comparison to past crises, the battle against this insidious adversary proved to be one of the most challenging and unprecedented, throwing into question whether the pandemic has truly receded or if it might resurge as a persistent burden on society, public health, and the global economy (Nicola et al., 2020; Aqeel et al., 2021). The declaration of a state of emergency rapidly gave way to widespread chaos, becoming an unsettling new facet of the "new normal" societal response (Farzanegan et al., 2021; Höpken et

al., 2021). Security measures implemented during this crisis included the enforcement of 24-hour curfews, the widespread adoption of remote work policies by numerous companies, homeschooling, the closure or limited operation of dining establishments, the imposition of social distancing mandates, and stringent border controls (Jones & Comfort, 2020). This intricate interplay of health, societal, and economic factors during and following the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the need for a deeper exploration of its impacts on various sectors, including tourism and hospitality. This study seeks to shed light on the psychological effects of the pandemic, the resultant changes in tourist behavior, and their repercussions on the tourism industry and associated businesses.

Literature review

The global COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on the tourism and hospitality industry, resulting in widespread disruptions and calamitous consequences. As previously noted, the far-reaching impacts of this pandemic have permeated all facets of human existence, with stringent measures culminating in a substantial downturn and, in some cases, the outright collapse of the tourism sector. The tourism industry stands out as an exceptionally "vulnerable" sector, bearing the brunt of the pandemic's repercussions, which will undoubtedly leave an indelible mark on businesses such as travel agencies and catering companies (Škare et al., 2021).

The adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic were conspicuous, notably marked by the precipitous decline in tourist demand (Aman et al., 2019). This trend manifested on a global scale, affecting nearly every country worldwide (Aleta et al., 2020). Within the global business landscape, the tourism sector emerged as one of the hardest-hit sectors, exacting a profound toll on the very social communities it contributes to by serving as a vital socio-economic driver for destination development (Aman et al., 2019).

Lei et al. (2021) reported that the tourism sector accounted for roughly 10% of the global GDP, employing a similar proportion of the global population. Moreover, the tourism sector has displayed remarkable resilience in numerous instances, receiving substantial support for its growth and development. The influence of tourism on local populations, particularly in Asia, has been instrumental in promoting business stability, contributing to the rise of the middle class within these communities (Jucan & Jucan, 2013; Canh & Thanh, 2020). Experts in the realms of tourism and economics have forecasted that the resurgence of tourism could lead to significant global GDP growth, with potential gains of up to 50% (Gajić et al., 2023). As underscored by Boluk et al. (2019), European countries represent a substantial share of global tourism, underscoring the critical significance of reinvigorating the tourism sector within the boundaries of the old continent.

The tourism industry maintains close ties to the service sector and stands as a pivotal driver influencing the economic well-being of communities across the globe (Wondirad et al., 2021). The intrinsic connection between tourism and the economy underscores the need to explore strategies for revitalizing and fortifying this vital sector, which has been profoundly affected by the pandemic's disruptions. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism and hospitality sector extend beyond the immediate economic challenges. The pandemic has prompted a comprehensive reevaluation of the tourism industry's strategies, resilience, and adaptability. It has accentuated the need for comprehensive crisis management, including health and safety protocols, contingency plans, and flexibility in operations (Agarwal et al., 2021).

The outbreak has also accelerated the adoption of technology in the tourism sector. Contactless check-ins, digital reservations, and the use of mobile apps for various services have become the norm. Furthermore, the pandemic has heightened the impor-

tance of sustainability and responsible tourism, emphasizing the need for eco-friendly practices and community engagement. As nations worldwide seek to recover, there is a growing realization that the revival of the tourism sector plays a pivotal role in broader economic recovery. Governments, along with industry stakeholders, are investing in marketing campaigns, infrastructure improvements, and support for small businesses to stimulate tourism and attract travelers. These initiatives aim to regain the lost ground and, as predicted by experts, contribute to future GDP growth. The interconnection between tourism and the broader service industry is a key driver for economic prosperity.

The revival of tourism has a ripple effect, benefiting a wide array of businesses, from transportation and accommodation to restaurants, cultural attractions, and local artisans (Aliperti et al., 2019; Abbas, 2020). A flourishing tourism sector not only stimulates local economies but also fosters cultural exchange, international cooperation, and understanding. In the post-pandemic world, the emphasis on health and safety will continue to influence travel decisions. Tourism stakeholders must continue to adapt to evolving health guidelines and invest in measures to ensure the well-being of both tourists and local populations. Collaboration among nations, as well as public-private partnerships, will be crucial in navigating the challenges posed by future pandemics or crises. In conclusion, while the COVID-19 pandemic inflicted considerable damage on the tourism and hospitality industry, it has also catalyzed changes and adaptations that are essential for the sector's recovery and long-term sustainability. The revival of tourism is not only an economic imperative but also a means to foster global interconnectedness, cultural exchange, and shared prosperity. Addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic and building a resilient tourism sector is essential for a brighter and more sustainable future for this vital industry (Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Gajić et al., 2022b).



It is noteworthy that previous literature has not sufficiently addressed the potential impact of pandemics on tourism. Furthermore, researchers and policymakers within the field of tourism have failed to adequately underscore these potential outcomes. Therefore, it is advisable that future research endeavors delve into this subject matter, extending their focus beyond the scope of the COVID-19 virus. Such situations, similar in nature, possess the potential to exert profoundly adverse effects on numerous countries, communities, destinations, and other relevant entities, as corroborated by certain authors (Ritchie, 2008; Vukolić et al., 2023). In this regard, it is essential to harness all available resources for public education, leveraging tools such as social media and other communication mediums, which can play a pivotal role in fostering effective communication (Su et al., 2021; Vukolić et al., 2021).

The significant effects of tourism on communities have been demonstrated by Lindberg and Johnson (1997) and Mamirkulova et al. (2020), mainly because of the financial advantages it provides to these regions. However, Tambo et al. (2021) argue that tourism, whether it occurs in an urban or rural setting, can also have negative effects on the local population living in tourist sites. The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the negative impacts of tourism on both the destination and the local people. As such, it is imperative to carefully evaluate and identify the particular effects of this phenomenon on a macro and micro scale. Right now, the world community is still attempting to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic's lingering negative impacts, which is a complicated scenario considering how widespread it is (Wang et al., 2020; Lange, 2021). Therefore, in order to minimize the pandemic's influence on communities and mitigate negative outcomes, it is essential to thoroughly explain the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on destinations, communities, and related aspects (Su et al., 2021).

Astutely pointing out that crisis circumstances in the tourism industry are interconnected systems that have the potential to significantly impact visitor activity, Scott and Laws (2006) underline this point. This viewpoint is consistent with the findings of writers like Ritchie (2008) and Sarkar et al. (2021), who highlight the critical role locals play in the destination in efficiently handling and reacting to emergencies. The significant effects of tourism on communities are both diverse and profound. While the economic impact is often the most readily observable and celebrated aspect, the implications extend to various dimensions of social, cultural, and environmental well-being. Tourism can be a lifeline for communities, especially in areas with limited economic diversification. It generates income, creates job opportunities, and fosters business development (Hu et al., 2021; Gajić et al., 2022a). Local entrepreneurs often flourish through tourism-related ventures, including accommodations, restaurants, and souvenir shops. The influx of tourists necessitates the improvement of infrastructure and public services. Roads, airports, public transportation, and sanitation facilities are often upgraded to accommodate the increased demand, which benefits both residents and visitors.

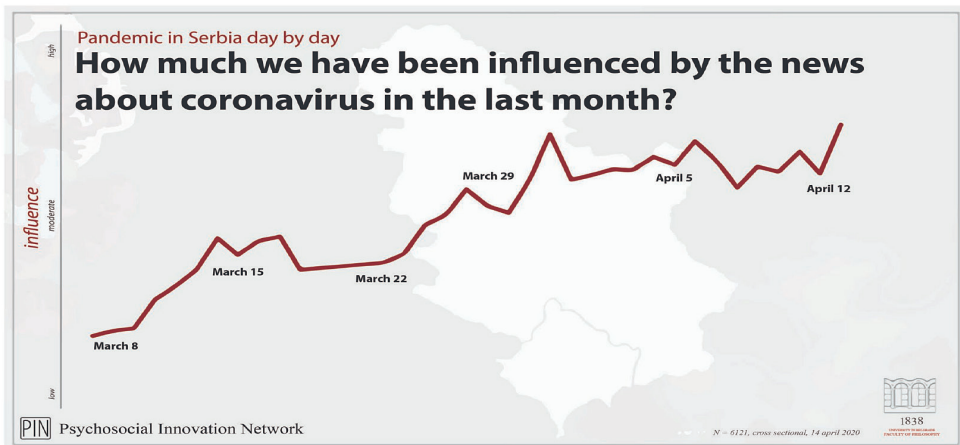
Tourism encourages cultural exchange and cross-cultural understanding (Kuo et al., 2008; Lukić et al., 2022). Local communities may showcase their traditions, arts, and customs, providing an opportunity for cultural preservation and dissemination. This exchange can enrich the lives of both tourists and residents. The exposure to a variety of people and cultures through tourism can lead to social development and greater tolerance. Communities open up to different perspectives and worldviews, fostering inclusivity and multiculturalism. The impact of tourism on the environment is a critical concern. Communities must strike a balance between attracting tourists and conserving their natural resources. Sustainable tourism practices, such as ecotourism and

responsible travel, aim to protect local ecosystems and wildlife (Sánchez-Cañizares et al., 2021; Rather, 2021).

Tourism can improve the quality of life for community members. It can lead to im-

proved healthcare, education, and access to amenities. However, it can also create social inequalities, so careful planning is essential. Monthly analysis of media influence is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The influence of media

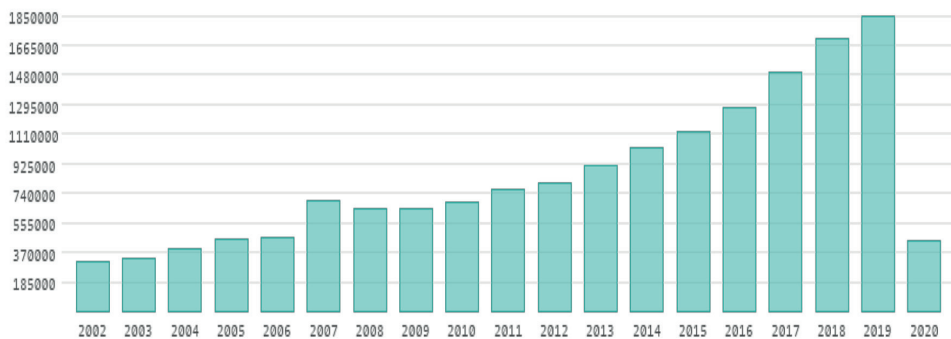


Source: PIN, 2022.

The public became anxious about any allegation made by the media (Bae & Chang, 2021). Based on the evidence that is currently accessible, it appears that after learning

about COVID-19, people’s degree of fear has greatly increased (PIN, 2023). Figure 2 provides data on the flow of tourists from 2002 to 2020.

Figure 2. Movement of tourist traffic in Serbia from 2002-2020.



Source: www.economist.com



The period leading up to the pandemic's onset, marked by consistent growth in tourism until the end of 2019, witnessed a notable surge in visitors to the country's interior. This influx gave rise to a new category of travelers with a heightened ecological consciousness (Ertuna et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2021). In light of the study's objectives and the available body of literature, several hypotheses were formulated:

H1a: The most substantial influence on the development of biases is posed by the risk of COVID-19.

H1b: The decision to travel to locations considered dangerous is not influenced by pre-existing biases.

H2: The respondents' intent to travel to high-risk areas and their risk perception do not exhibit statistically significant changes based on their gender composition.

Methodology

The research was carried out in the Republic of Serbia in three city centers, in Novi Sad (245 respondents), Belgrade (319 respondents), and Niš (236 respondents), on a random sample of 800 respondents. During the survey, a total of 850 surveys were distributed, 50 surveys were not analyzed because they were not filled in correctly, while the remaining 800 were analyzed. With the help of the G Power test, it was determined that the number of samples is representative.

The data collected from the survey were subsequently processed and analyzed using SPSS 21.00 software. To assess the responses to survey items, a five-point Likert scale was employed, allowing for a quantitative evaluation of participants' perspectives. The methodology used various statistical techniques to gain insights from the data:

- Descriptive Statistical Analysis: This initial step involved summarizing and presenting demographic characteristics of the respondents, offering a comprehensive overview of the sample.
- Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA): EFA was utilized to identify and extract relevant items or factors within

the dataset, helping to discern underlying patterns and relationships in the responses.

- Multiple Regression Analysis: This technique was employed to assess the influence of various predictors on the criterion variable, i.e., the decision to travel to risky destinations. It allowed for the identification of significant factors that play a role in travel choices to such destinations.
- Canonical Discriminative Analysis: This analysis aimed to uncover disparities in the perception of risk types and travel to risky destinations concerning the gender composition of the respondents. It examined how gender influenced individuals' perceptions and decisions regarding travel to high-risk areas.

The methodology employed a systematic approach to gather, process, and analyze data, thereby offering valuable insights into the factors influencing travel choices to risky destinations, with particular attention to gender-related differences in risk perception and travel decisions.

Results

A total of 41.9% of men and 58.1% of women participated in the research. Then, of the total number of respondents, 20% are between 18 and 30 years old, 46.9% belong to the age category of 31 to 65 years, and 33.1% are over 65 years old. Through exploratory factor analysis, all items were subjected to factor extraction, resulting in the identification of four distinct factors. These factors were denoted as follows: F1 - "Type of fear", F2 - "Safety measures", F3 - "Cause of prejudice", and F4 - "Travel to risky destinations". Cronbach's alpha was computed for each set of items grouped within these four factors to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the questionnaire.

Factor F1, labeled "Type of fear", encompassed three specific questions, each exhibiting high reliability as indicated by their respective Cronbach alpha values:

pandemic risk ($\alpha=0.732$), financial risk ($\alpha=0.824$), and natural risk ($\alpha=0.804$). Factor F2, termed “Safety measures”, consisted of questions evaluating the adequacy of safety measures, with high internal consistency: vaccines are sufficient ($\alpha=0.775$), masks are sufficient ($\alpha=0.865$), physical distance is sufficient ($\alpha=0.892$), and hygiene is sufficient ($\alpha=0.727$). Factor F3, designated as “Cause of prejudice”, incorporated questions pertaining to the sources or reasons for biases. The questions within this factor exhibited strong internal consistency:

media ($\alpha=0.744$) and personal experiences ($\alpha=0.821$). Lastly, Factor F4, titled “Travel to risky destinations”, included questions related to individuals’ willingness to travel to high-risk areas. The questions within this factor demonstrated high reliability: it is necessary to return to normal ($\alpha=0.891$) and I still have concerns about traveling ($\alpha=0.825$). Notably, every Cronbach alpha result for each question fell within ranges, demonstrating a high degree of overall questionnaire reliability.

Table 1. Results of factor analysis - extraction of items into factors

Component	Extraction Sums of Squared Loadings			Rotation Sums of Squared Loadings ^a	
	Total	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %	Total
F1	5.198	5.198	44.011	44.011	4.761
F2	1.422	1.422	12.200	12.200	3.617
F3	0.854	0.854	7.866	7.866	2.757
F4	0.912	0.912	7.112	7.112	1.943
Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.					

Source: author’s research

Multiple regression analysis determined the influence of predictors on the criterion variable Travel to risky destinations. The percentage of explained variance is 64.2%, which seems very suitable for further

analysis. The regression analysis model also shows that the statistical significance is within the allowed limits ($p=0.00$), with values of $F=456,366$, and $df=10$.

Table 2. Results of predictor influence on criterion variable

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Std.error	Beta	t	Sig.
F1----F3	0.176	0.053	0.130	5.433	0.000
F2----F3	0.079	0.054	0.073	1.554	0.000
F3----F4	0.959	0.055	0.593	14.302	0.000

Source: author’s research

The table reveals the statistical significance of each factor in predicting the criterion variable. Specifically, the influence of F1 on F3, representing the impact of the type of fear on prejudice, is significant with a p-value (sig) of 0.00 and a t-value of 5.433. Similarly, the influence of F2 on F3, signifying the influence of safety measures on preju-

dice, is statistically significant with $sig=0.00$ and $t=1.554$. Furthermore, the impact of prejudice (F3) on travel to risky destinations (F4) is highly significant, with $sig=0.00$ and $t=14.302$. These findings indicate that each of the predictors contributes significantly to the criterion variable. The magnitude of their influence is reflected in the coefficient



B, while the coefficient β illustrates a positive correlation of each predictor with the criterion variable.

The results of this analysis refute hypothesis H1a, which posited that only the risk of pandemic influences the formation of biases regarding risky destinations. Similarly, hypothesis H1b is rejected as the analysis demonstrates that biases do indeed impact

the intention to travel to high-risk destinations. Canonical discriminative analysis revealed differences in the perception of attitudes about going to risky countries, as well as the strength of the type of fear in relation to gender. The values of statistical significance are within acceptable limits: Wilks' Lambda value ($df=1$, $\text{sig}=0.00$, $X^2=19.234$).

Table 3. Results of canonical discriminative analysis

Factor	Values	
PANDEMIC RISK	-0.577	Male .189
FINANCIAL RISK	0.707	
NATURAL RISK	0.480	Female- .167
Travel to risky destinations	-0.445	

*TIRD- travel in to risky destinations; ^a. 58.8% of original grouped cases correctly classified.

Source: author's research

Upon scrutinizing the direction of the demographic factor, it becomes evident that men exhibit a higher level of fear associated with natural risk and financial risk. In contrast, women tend to display greater apprehension related to COVID-19 risk and the prospect of traveling to risky destinations. This gender-based analysis yielded a correct classification rate of 58.8% among respondents. These findings confirm hypothesis H2, supporting the notion that disparities exist in how individuals perceive different types of risk and their willingness to travel, based on their gender.

Conclusions

The global landscape of tourism has undergone profound shifts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, ushering in an era of uncertainty, resilience, and adaptation. As the world grapples with the ongoing ramifications of this unprecedented event, it has become increasingly evident that the tourism sector carries a hidden weight, one that extends far beyond the mere movement of people and leisure. This "hidden weight" encompasses multifaceted implications that are often concealed beneath the surface of

this crucial industry. Research conducted in the Republic of Serbia in 2023 provides a valuable glimpse into the complex interplay between tourism, risk perception, and gender dynamics, illuminating the intricacies of travel intentions in this post-pandemic period. It underscores that the influences on travelers' decision-making are far from one-dimensional.

The study reveals the substantial role played by various types of fear, such as the fear of pandemic risk, financial risk, and natural risk, alongside the impact of safety measures. Additionally, biases or prejudices are demonstrated to significantly influence travel intentions. Moreover, the research highlights the profound gender-related differences in risk perception and travel intentions. The unique concerns of men regarding natural and financial risks juxtaposed with the apprehensions of women related to COVID-19 risk and travel to high-risk destinations underscore the nuanced factors at play in the decision-making process. The study also challenges preconceived notions by both confirming and refuting hypotheses, emphasizing the intricate and multifaceted nature of these influences. It underscores the need for a comprehensive and adaptable ap-

proach to understanding and addressing the motivations and concerns of travelers in this evolving landscape.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the complex interplay between tourism, risk perception, and gender-related differences. The study, conducted in the Republic of Serbia in 2023, sheds light on the dynamics of travel intentions in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings indicate that multiple factors play a pivotal role in influencing individuals' decisions to visit high-risk destinations. These factors encompass various dimensions of fear, including fear of pandemic risk, financial risk, natural risk, and the influence of safety measures. Furthermore, the study underscores the impact of biases or prejudices on travel intentions. The research reveals significant gender-related disparities in risk perception and travel intentions. Men exhibit a greater degree of concern regarding natural and financial risks, while women tend to express heightened apprehension concerning COVID-19 risk and the prospect of traveling to risky destinations. The study also highlights the complex relationships between these factors, demonstrating that fear, safety measures, biases, and gender all contribute to the decision-making process of travelers. It is worth noting that the research's hypotheses were both supported and refuted, underscoring the multifaceted nature of these influences.

As the world continues to grapple with the ongoing ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic and the ever-evolving landscape of global tourism, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers, the tourism industry, and researchers. The findings emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the concerns and motivations of travelers, with a specific focus on the nuanced effects of gender and various risk factors. Ultimately, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate relationships between risk perception, biases, and gender in the context of travel intentions, shedding light on the

multifaceted nature of decision-making in a post-pandemic world. These insights can inform more informed and targeted strategies for tourism recovery and resilience. While this research offers valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study focused on a specific geographic region, the Republic of Serbia, during a particular timeframe, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other contexts and periods. Future research should encompass a more diverse range of regions and timeframes to enhance the robustness of the findings. Second, the use of a self-reported survey may introduce response bias, and the findings are reliant on the accuracy of the participants' responses.

Employing mixed-method approaches, including qualitative interviews or observational studies, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics explored in this research. Third, the analysis primarily focused on gender as a demographic variable, but other sociodemographic factors such as age, education, and socioeconomic status can also influence risk perception and travel intentions. Future studies should consider a broader array of demographic variables to capture a more nuanced picture. In terms of practical implications, the findings of this research can inform policymakers and the tourism industry in developing tailored strategies to address the concerns and motivations of travelers. Recognizing the impact of various types of fear, the influence of safety measures, and the role of biases in travel decisions can guide the development of effective risk management and communication strategies. From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the evolving literature on the multifaceted nature of risk perception and its relationship with travel intentions. It underscores the importance of considering not only the direct impact of the COVID-19 pandemic but also the mediating influence of biases and the moderating role of gender. Future theoretical research should delve



deeper into the intricacies of these relationships and explore additional variables that may come into play.

In summary, this research serves as a valuable stepping stone in understanding the complex dynamics of risk perception and travel intentions in the post-COVID-19 era. Its limitations provide opportunities for further exploration, and its findings offer practical guidance for stakeholders in the tourism industry. As the world continues to adapt to the new normal, a more comprehensive understanding of these dynamics is essential for informed decision-making and the development of resilient and responsive tourism strategies.

The “hidden weight” of tourism in a post-pandemic period is a multifaceted and dynamic force, intertwined with fear, safety measures, biases, and gender dynamics. As the world adapts to the new normal, a more profound understanding of these intricacies is essential for informed decision-making, risk management, and the development of resilient and responsive tourism strategies that not only revive the industry but also ensure the well-being and satisfaction of travelers. This hidden weight, once unveiled and comprehensively addressed, will shape the future of tourism in the post-pandemic world.

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